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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000047

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SUBJECT: RECENT PUBLIC OPINION POLL TRACKS WITH IRPO'S ANECDOTAL REPORTING

REF: RPO DUBAI 0045

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REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(C) Summary. The results of the Terror Free Tomorrow June 2007 survey of 1000 Iranians overall tracks with what IRPO hears anecdotally from Iranians. Both the survey and IRPO's findings indicate a large amount of support for Iran's nuclear energy program among Iranians, but mixed views regarding a nuclear weapon. While support for the nuclear program runs deep in Iranian society, the people see Iran's economy as the top issue of concern. The challenge there in is that while the Iranian government closely monitors public opinion, its policy making is not often responsive to public wishes. End Summary.

2.(C) The telephonic survey has the advantage of a much more methodical assessment of views and much broader access to the Iranian population than IRPO has in Dubai. The reliability of polling in Iran is questionable, however, given that Iranians tell us that the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) also does polling (and never publishes the results. reftel). If widely known, this would color how freely Iranians are likely to speak to an unknown pollster. Furthermore, many Iranians are nervous that their email and telephone lines are monitored. There always seems to be a cultural tendency to tell people what they want to hear.

It's the economy, stupid

3.(C) A main finding of the study is that 29% of respondents view developing nuclear weapons as a very important priority for the Iranian government, while 88% of respondents considered improving the economy a very important priority. At the same time, 52% favor the development of nuclear weapons and believe Iranians would live in a safer world if Iran had nuclear weapons. Not an insignificant number - 31% - thought that if the government had nuclear weapons, Iranian people would live in a more dangerous world. This generally tracks with what Iranian interlocutors tell us. By far, the economy is their greatest concern, a sentiment then candidate Ahmadi-Nejad skillfully tapped into, after the previous government was criticized for prioritizing social reform over the economy. We are not surprised by the fact that 92% ranked creation of new jobs and 90% curbing inflation as very important tasks for the

government, particularly given that 64% of respondents said they did not work.

4.(C) It was noteworthy that the percentage who said Ahmadi-Nejad has failed to keep his campaign promise to "put oil money on the table of the people themselves" was not higher than 56%. Most Iranians we see in Dubai have only criticism for the president, but again we are unlikely to meet those people getting direct handouts on the president's provincial tours. It would indicate that Ahmadi-Nejad's popularity may not be as low as it appears from the outside, but that many are still withholding judgment on his economic program. This might explain the fact that less than half the respondents (42%) said they thought the Iranian economy was headed in the wrong direction, and barely more than half (52%) said the president's policies have not succeeded in reducing unemployment and inflation. It seemed surprising that only 31.4% said their own economic situation was worse than when Ahmadi-Nejad took office in August 2005. Nonetheless, only 18% of Iranians said the overall economic situation was excellent or good, despite the fact that reportedly journalists in Iran have been discouraged from writing negative stories about Iran's economy. It is also important to note that some have benefited from rising property prices or from government largess.

5.(C) On the other hand, it seems significant in a country riddled with corruption that a larger percent (36%) thought overall corruption had decreased since Ahmadi-Nejad came into office - promising to go after the "oil mafia" and others - than those who thought corruption had increased (28%). Again, this sentiment is contrary to several IRPO Dubai interlocutors who believe that those charged with cleaning up the smuggling are the real smugglers themselves.

Mixed views on nuclear issues

6.(C) Numerous Iranians have told us they hope Iran develops a nuclear weapon, but it is clear most would like their government

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to prioritize improving the economy. The reasons why those Iranians support acquisition of a nuclear weapon seem to focus on security and national pride. Post-Iran-Iraq war trauma seems to infuse Iranian society, and Iranians seem to fear that one day in the future they could again be the victim of an aerial attack or invasion - either by the US, Israel, or a future aggressive neighbor. While a few Iranians tell us they are hoping for a US attack to overthrow their government, most say Iranians do not want any more violent upheaval. Some Iranians also cite national pride as a reason why they want a nuclear weapon, usually indicating that if Pakistan has a bomb, so should they. They feel that Iran will be taken more seriously if armed with a weapon. Even some Iranians who are extremely critical of their government still support acquiring a nuclear weapon. They do not view this as entrenching the current government in power but as protecting the Iranian nation. A few Iranians, however, tell us they do not believe their government is seeking a nuclear weapon.

7.(C) The high numbers (79-80%) who responded they would favor Iran providing full inspections and a guarantee not to develop or possess nuclear weapons in exchange for various incentives is noteworthy, particularly as few Iranians we meet seem to know much about the contents of the P5+1 package on the table. These results would suggest that they would support the package if information with more specifics could reach them. It further reinforces the notion that the economy is much more important - at least to the Iranian people - than a nuclear program. The finding that support for nuclear weapons drops to below 17% if Iran were to receive outside assistance in return for full inspections and a guarantee not to have nuclear weapons likely means that the respondents assumed such an agreement would improve the economy and at the same time, reduce the likelihood of military confrontation in the future.

8.(C) It is not surprising that 78% of Iranians favor the development of nuclear energy, given all the government's rhetoric equating nuclear energy with progress and international stature. Also, at the time the poll was taken, the price of gasoline had just been increased 25% and rationing was being discussed. In addition, Iranians have long suffered from electrical outages and high levels of pollution in large cities. This statistic tracks with what we hear from Iranians.

US rapprochement

9.(C) The figure of 68% of Iranians strongly or somewhat favoring normal relations and trade with US tracks with Iranian pollster Abbas Abdi's infamous 2003 survey that landed him in prison. It seems low compared to what we hear (mostly from Iranians in Dubai for US visas, which tends to color what they say to us). However, we are cognizant of the fact that we meet few Iranians from the estimated 10-20% of society who are considered hard-core supporters of the Islamic Republic.

10.(C) While it was not surprising that the European Union and specifically France rated higher than the US for desired trade relations, given their longstanding presence in Iran, we were surprised China and Russia outranked the US (64% strongly favored normal trade relations with China and 48% with Russia, versus 33% with the US). Iranian markets are reportedly flooded with cheap Chinese goods. While many say they would prefer higher quality US goods, perhaps many realize they would not be able to afford them even if they were available. Although they may be perceived as reliable trade partners, as far as political partners, most Iranians tell us that the Chinese and the Russians cannot be trusted. On the other hand, we were not surprised by the low rating the UK received (39%), given the widespread conspiracy theories we hear about continuing British "dominance" over Iran and "alliance with the mullahs."

Attitudes toward government

11.(C) It is remarkable that 61% of respondents said over the phone that they strongly oppose (53%) or somewhat oppose (8%) "a political system where the 'Supreme Leader' rules according to religious principles and cannot be chosen or replaced by a direct vote of the people." In the corollary question, 72% strongly supported and 7% somewhat supported a political system where the 'Supreme Leader,' along with all leaders, can be chosen and replaced by a free and direct vote of the people. This would indicate a high degree of disagreement with the concept of velayet-e faqih in Iran and a high desire for greater

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democracy, which tracks with what Iranians tell us. Because the wording of the question contain too many variables (existence of a 'Supreme Leader,' government based on religious principles, and issue of direct vote), however, it does not reliably measure level of overall approval of the existing government. The very low degree of support (10%) for a return of a monarchical system tracks with what IRPO hears, although a number of people maintain that Iran "needs" an authoritarian leader.

Financial assistance to terrorist groups

12.(C) The wording of several other questions - at least as translated into English on the organization's website terrorfreetomorrow.org - were also open to several interpretations. The findings noted almost two-thirds of Iranians support "financial assistance" to groups like Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hizballah, and Iraqi Shia militias (notably a slighter larger "strong support" rating for Sunni Palestinian groups than Lebanese Shia Hizballah or Iraqi Shia militia groups). This seems to contradict with what we largely hear - resentment that funds badly needed at home are shipped off to Arabs. However, the question did not specify funds for humanitarian versus military support. Groups like Hamas and

Hizballah are widely recognized to be involved with many humanitarian projects, such as hospitals. There is pervasive sympathy in Iran for Palestinian and Iraqi suffering, as well as fear that a normalized Iraq would once again turn against Iran. We also note that few Iranians with whom we talk seem to know anything about Iranian military assistance to Iraqi Shia groups.

Dividing the question would have given a more useful response. It is noteworthy in any case that support for this assistance is ranked lower than seeking trade and political relations with the West, even at the cost of recognition of Israel (55%). Again, the economy is the Iranian people's primary immediate concern, with security likely a close second.

Ranking priorities

13.(C) Another set of questions could be read in two different ways, at least in the English translation: "I am going to read you a list of possible long-term goals for the government of Iran. Please tell me whether you think these goals are very important, somewhat important, somewhat unimportant, or not at all important for the government of Iran." The respondents could have understood the question to ask if I think that the government should prioritize this or how I judge the government to be actually prioritizing this. In any case, again, the economy by far got the highest rating of importance.

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